

Message Text

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EXDIS

DEPT PLEASE PASS DIA AND USCINCEUR

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS, SY

SUBJECT: INTERNAL UNREST IN SYRIA

1. SUMMARY: WE CONTINUE TO HEAR DIFFICULT-TO-ASSESS REPORTS OF UNREST WITHIN SYRIAN OFFICER CORPS AND OF ARREST OF OFFICERS AND BAATH PARTY CIVILIANS. WHILE OVERALL SECURITY SITUATION DOES NOT APPEAR THREATENED, RIGHT-WING MUSLIM ELEMENTS APPARENTLY CONTINUING THEIR ATTEMPTS TO PROVOKE CONFESSIONAL TENSIONS WITHIN SYRIA AND SEVERAL QUARTERS, NOTABLY IRAQIS AND EGYPTIANS, WOULD LIKE TO SEE ASAD EMBARRASSED. AS LONG AS SYRIA CONTINUES ITS CURRENT INVOLVEMENT IN LEBANON, IT MUST EXPECT THIS SORT OF ATMOSPHERE TO PREVAIL. END SUMMARY.

2. EMBASSY CONTINUES TO PICK UP PERSISTENT BUT DIFFICULT-TO-ASSESS RUMORS AND REPORTS OF INTERNAL UNREST WITH SYRIA. WEST GERMAN EMBOFF TOLD US APRIL 25 THAT SYRIAN SOURCE WHOM HE CONSIDERED RELIABLE DESCRIBED TO HIM DETAILS OF "MUTINY" APRIL 9 LED BY SOME SAF PILOTS. WEST GERMAN SAID THAT BAATH PARTY REGIONAL COMMAND HAD MET EVENING OF APRIL 8 TO DECIDE WHETHER TO APPROVE SENDING SYRIAN TROOPS INTO LEBANON. AFTER

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LENGTHY DEBATE, COMMAND FINALLY APPROVED THE LIMITED

APRIL 10-11 MOVEMENTS. HOWEVER, PILOTS SENT UP TO SUPPORT SYRIAN TROOPS REFUSED TO CARRY OUT THEIR RETURN TO BASE. "MUTINY" THEN SPREAD TO QTEIFE CAMP. HIS SOURCE CLAIMED THAT 120 OFFICERS HAD BEEN ORIGINALLY DETAINED, AND EMBOFF CLAIMED THAT NUMBER HAD SINCE INCREASED.

3. USUALLY RELIABLE SYRIAN SOURCE TOLD EMBOFF APRIL 26 THAT GROUP OF OFFICERS HAD BEEN ARRESTED AROUND APRIL 22 FOR PLOTTING AGAINST REGIME. WESTERN EMBASSY OFFICER ALSO TOLD EMBOFF APRIL 26 OF HIS CONVERSATION WITH CUBAN EMBOFF OVER WEEKEND IN WHICH CUBAN STATED APPROXIMATELY 50 MIDDLE-ESCHELON OFFICERS HAD BEEN ARRESTED LAST WEEK FOR ANTI-REGIME ACTIVITY AND THAT 150 BAATHIST CIVILIANS HAD ALSO BEEN DETAINED. SOURCE SAID THAT CUBAN CLAIMED BAATHISTS HAD CRITICIZED IN PARTY MEETING "ERRONEOUS" SYRIAN POLICY IN LEBANON.

4. WE HAVE FURTHER HEARD FROM RELIABLE SYRIAN SOURCE THAT THREE WEEKS AGO AUTHORITIES ARRESTED SOME MEMBERS OF SYRIAN COMMUNIST PARTY (CPS). EAST GERMAN DIPLOMAT CONFIRMED TO EMBOFF THAT ARRESTS HAD TAKEN PLACE BUT CLAIMED THAT ONLY MEMBERS OF SPLINTER GROUP NOT ASSOCIATED WITH BAKDASH FACTION OF CPS HAD BEEN DETAINED. ACCORDING TO EAST GERMAN, BAATH FEARS THAT CPS COULD MADE BID FOR POWER, EVEN THOUGH HIS EMBASSY KNEW THAT, ON CONTRARY, CPS "UNDER INSTRUCTIONS" TO WORK WITH BAATH WITHIN NATIONAL PROGRESSIVE FRONT AND HAS NO INTENTION OF TRYING TO DISPLACE BAATH.

5. RIGHT-WING MUSLIM ELEMENTS STILL APPEAR TO BE ACTIVE IN PROVOKING MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN CONFESSIONAL TENSIONS. SYRIAN SOURCES WITH G-2 CONTACTS TOLD EMBOFF THAT MAN BELONGING TO "LIBERATION OF ISLAM" GROUP HAD BEEN ARRESTED APRIL 16 CARRYING PISTOL AND TWO GRENADES. UNDER INTERROGATION HE HAD NAMED SECOND INDIVIDUAL AS ACCOMPLICE, WHOM AUTHORITIES LATER PICKED UP. THEY CONFESSED THAT THEIR ASSIGNMENT WAS TO CAUSE VIOLENT DISTURBANCES ON BOTH EASTER SUNDAY CELEBRATIONS -- EASTERN AND WESTERN RITES -- BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS TO EXACERBATE CONFESSIONAL TENSIONS

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IN SYRIA. ANOTHER EMBOFF HEARD FROM LOCAL SOURCE RESIDING IN HOMS THAT ON APRIL 23 GROUP OF CATHOLICS IN HOMS GOING TO THEIR CHURCH WERE SET UPON BY MUSLIM GANG BUT THAT CATHOLICS HAD BEEN CARRYING WEAPONS AND MANAGED TO DRIVE OFF ATTACKERS AFTER SHOOTING TWO OF THEM IN FEET. WE ALSO HAVE HEARD THAT SCUFFLE TOOK PLACE RECENTLY AT DAMASCUS UNIVERSITY BETWEEN SOME CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM STUDENTS RESULTING FROM ANTI-CHRISTIAN GRAFFITI SCRAWLED

ACROSS ONE OF UNIVERSITY WALLS.

6. SEVERAL SYRIAN AND WESTERN SOURCES HAVE MENTIONED CONCERN ON PART OF REGIME THAT IT HAD BECOME INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT TO COOPE WITH SECURITY THREATS ARISING FROM LARGE NUMBERS OF LEBANESE REFUGEES -- WHICH MANY BELIEVE NUMBER OVER THREE HUNDRED THOUSAND -- PRESENTLY RESIDING IN SYRIA. SYRIAN SECURITY OFFICIALS, ACCORDING TO ONE AMERICAN NEWSMAN, SUSPECT THAT IRAQIS, LIBYANS AND PERHAPS OTHERS MAY HAVE INFILTRATED AGENTS INTO SYRIA IN GUISE OF REFUGEES. NUMBER OF REFUGEES HAVE REACHED SUCH PROPORTIONS THAT SYRIANS SIMPLY UNABLE TO KEEP TRACT OF THEM.

7. COMMENT: WE FIND THESE VARYING REPORTS DIFFICULT TO ASSESS BUT IT SEEMS SAFE TO SAY THAT THEY ARE THE RESULT OF POLITICAL STRAINS CREATED BY SYRIAN ROLE IN LEBANESE CRISIS. MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AND IRAQIS APPEAR TO BE WORKING OPENLY AGAINST PRESIDENT ASAD, AND EGYPTIANS WOULD LIKE AT VERY LEAST TO EMBARRASS HIM. MANY PALESTINIANS ARE NO LONGER CONSIDERED UNQUESTIONED SUPPORTERS OF SYRIA. IT IS ALSO UNDOUBTEDLY TRUE THAT SOME PROMINENT BAATHIS AND SOME MILITARY ELEMENTS QUESTION DIRECTION OF ASAD'S POLICY IN LEBANON. IN THESE CIRCUMSTANCES, IT IS NOT SURPRISING THAT INCIDENTS OF UNREST MAY HAVE OCCURRED AND THAT REPORTS OF EVEN MORE SERIOUS INTERNAL TURMOIL MAY HAVE BEEN SET AFLOAT BY ONE ILL-WISHER OR ANOTHER. MOST POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS REPORTS ARE THOSE OF UNREST IN MILITARY OFFICERS CORPS. THESE ARE HARD TO CONFIRM, PARTICULARLY SO WHEN THEY DEAL WITH MIDDLE- AND JUNIOR-LEVEL OFFICERS ABOUT WHOM LITTLE IS KNOWN. WE CAN SAY THAT LOYALTY OF KEY SENIOR OFFICERS TO ASAD DOES NOT APPEAR THUSFAR TO HAVE BEEN AFFECTED, AND DISCONTENT IN OTHER QUARTERS SEEMS SO FAR MANAGEABLE. IN RECENT WEEKS, HOWEVER, REGIME'S SECURITY
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SERVICES HAVE BEEN MORE IN EVIDENCE THAN IN THE PAST, WITH ROVING PATROLS CIRCULATING CONTINUOUSLY THROUGHOUT DAMASCUS. AS LONG AS SYRIA CONTINUES ITS CURRENT INVOLVEMENT IN LEBANON, IT MUST EXPECT THIS SORT OF ATMOSPHERE TO PREVAIL.
MURPHY

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